Approaches to Writing Poetry

No infallible advice can be given on how to write a poem, because poets develop their own approaches in time. Nonetheless, here are a few exercises to generate a raw copy.

Suggestions…

1. Plan! Ask yourself…

* How much time is available? Opening lines can be dashed off in minutes but completion may take days. Be cautious, and aim perhaps for 5-10 lines in an evening. Don’t wait for the muse, but write what you can when you can. Odd phrases and lines are at least something to work from, and more inspiring than a blank page.
* When you write letters, essays, or tell stories, do you usually start from a newspaper article you’ve read, an anecdote told or overheard, something witnessed, a general reflection? Start a poem in the way you’re most comfortable with.
* What sort of poem do you have in mind? A story, a comment, a tribute, a sonnet, a protest, an elegy, a character study, a haiku, a memorial? Skim through contemporary examples to start yourself off.
* Imagine the poem were a newspaper article. What points would you make? With what evidence and resounding arguments? Got it together? Go one then: let yourself go! Something will emerge.

1. Make sure the subject’s important to you. Death of a friend or family member, rites of passage, the bitter sweetness of first love, one of life’s turning points, old transgressions, a childhood incident, injustices, unacknowledged fears…Think of the themes that have ruled or currently rule your existence. Use a mask of the second or third person if the content is too personal of painful.
2. Give yourself up to reveries. Go for a walk, lie on the sofa and close your eyes, go to bed, cut out the surrounding world. Jot down the things that come to you, in whatever order or confusion. Put the “scribblings” away, and only open the folder hours or days later to see what you’ve got. You’ll be amazed at what’s inside.
3. Free the imagination! Try:

* Automatic writing. Say 5 minutes at a stretch, continuously. Once the 5 minutes are up, go through the material you’ve collected and circle or highlight anything interesting.
* Get a friend to say words at random. Write down the first response that comes to you. Build a poem around three of the words.
* Open a diary, journal, novel, magazine, whatever and jot down the first incident on three successive pages. Make a poem of these.
* Describe, as closely as you can, some recurring dream or nightmare. Reverse the sequence, and then make a poem.

1. Work through metaphors. Take four lines of any contemporary poem. Identify the metaphors. Then, use a thesaurus to find alternatives for the metaphors. Repeat with the alternatives, finding words even further removed from the originals. Think deeply on three or so of the more interesting words, and see if you can draft a poem by incorporating them into the written word.
2. Write a pastiche. Take a stanza of something well-known and rewrite it so that…
3. The idiom is entirely different.
4. The lines end with nonsense rhymes.
5. The piece is ruined with the smallest possible change.
6. The piece looks completely fresh and contemporary.
7. Take the last line of one of your poems (which needn’t be good) and carry on from there, ignoring entirely what you drafted before.